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SUBJECT: PALESTINIANS AND PALESTINIAN-JORDANIANS PRAISE
APPOINTMENT OF ABU MAZEN, SAY IRAQ STRIKE HURTS U.S.
CREDIBILITY ON THE MEPP

Classified By: A/DCM Doug Silliman for reasons 1.5 (B)(D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) During a series of discussions in the days before the start of war in Iraq, prominent Palestinian-Jordanians and Palestinians resident in Jordan told A/DCM that the appointment of Abu Mazen as Palestinian Prime Minister should provide a big boost to good government in the PNA. However, they said Abu Mazen needed to secure immediately from Israel concrete concessions -- an end to targeted killings, house demolitions and a lifting of restrictions on movement within the West Bank and Gaza -- to prove that he can have a positive impact, and to strengthen him vis-a-vis Yassir Arafat. While applauding the words of President Bush's March 14 White House statement on the Roadmap, all roundly criticized (or angrily denounced) the President personally for announcing U.S. support for the Quartet Roadmap only on the eve of war with Iraq. All said that, because of the (then) impending war against Iraq, U.S. credibility on the MEPP has sunk to a new low. Only public U.S. pressure on Israel and concrete and visible progress toward Israeli withdrawal and creation of a Palestinian state can turn the tide. We are struck that the President's March 14 Roadmap remarks did not produce the usual local spike in optimism on the MEPP. END SUMMARY.

ABU MAZEN GOOD FOR PALESTINIANS AT HOME...

2. (C) A/DCM met March 17-20 with several prominent Palestinian-Jordanians and Palestinians resident in Jordan. All praised the appointment of Abu Mazen as Palestinian Prime Minister. Hamadi Fara'neh, a Palestinian-Jordanian former Member of Parliament, said that Abu Mazen is personally well-respected, has the support of Fatah and excellent contacts in Israel. Abu Mazen's most important task, according to Fara'neh, will be to speak to Israelis and provide a positive Palestinian focus for the peace movement inside Israel. Labor's decision to stay out of the government should help Abu Mazen in this task, especially if the new Palestinian PM and Labor leaders maintain public contacts to put pressure on Sharon. PNC Chairman Salim Zanon hoped that Abu Mazen's appointment would help unite different factions of Fatah and "show to Israel and the world a positive, sympathetic Palestinian face."

3. (C) Fara'neh and George Musleh, a Palestinian businessman from Beit Sahour but resident in Amman, said that the appointment of a PM should help improve the quality of Palestinian governance. It will be possible under a PM, Musleh said, for an average Palestinian and the Palestinian media to criticize the quality of work of a Palestinian ministry without it being taken as an implicit criticism of Yassir Arafat and, by extension, "the Palestinian struggle." "Palestinians have never before been able to criticize the job the PNA does without being seen as attacking Abu Ammar (Arafat)."

... BUT FACES AN UPHILL BATTLE WITH ISRAEL ON SECURITY

4. (C) Fara'neh and Adnan Abu Odeh, a former advisor to King Hussein and King Abdullah, said that the U.S. war against Iraq will make it more difficult for Abu Mazen to take the concrete security steps Israel is demanding. HAMAS and Islamic Jihad (PIJ), they said, see Fatah as their enemy and will oppose any real consolidation of PNA control in Gaza or the West Bank. He expects HAMAS and PIJ to try to stir up the Palestinian street to prevent Abu Mazen from taking security actions against them. They argued strongly that many Palestinians will not support strong security steps without concrete Israeli "concessions" that Palestinians could "see and feel." The most important things Israel could do would be to end targeted killings ("assassinations") and house demolitions, lift roadblocks between Palestinian towns on the West Bank and Gaza, and withdraw from West Bank cities

reoccupied in the past year. In the fairly near term, Israel would have to withdraw its forces to the September 28, 2000 lines, and engage in real negotiations. Both felt that Israeli pledges to end settlement activity would be less valuable since they would not be immediately visible to average Palestinians.

IRAQ WAR DESTROYS BUSH'S CREDIBILITY ON THE MEPP

15. (C) The harshest words in these conversation were aimed not at PM Sharon and his new, conservative government, but at President Bush. All of these interlocutors asked pointedly why the President had waited until the eve of war before he endorsed the Roadmap. Fara'neh and Musleh angrily dismissed the President's March 14 White House remarks as an "insulting attempt to win Arab and European support for his war in Iraq." When asked how the U.S. could win back the goodwill it might lose during an Iraq campaign, all responded that a quick, clean, and honorable campaign in Iraq coupled with "real American pressure on Israel" that produced "real movement toward a Palestinian state" would win back many suspicious Palestinians.

COMMENT

16. (C) Originally conceived as a way to promote the President's March 14 Roadmap remarks with Palestinians here, these meetings turned instead into acrimonious discussions of the lack of credibility of the U.S. (in general) and President Bush (specifically) in the region. Most previous U.S. statements on the MEPP (such as the President's June 24, 2002 speech) produced in Jordan at least a temporary spike in optimism. We were struck -- but given the intense focus here on Iraq, not surprised -- that the President's very positive March 14 statement produced criticism of American credibility.

GNEHM